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**Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1899)
A Reader Response Perspective**

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Literaturwissenschaftliche Einführungsübung
Referat: *Heart of Darkness*; eine reader response perspective

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I. Short historical look; reception by contemporary readers/other novellists

- Serial publication in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899.
- Conrad about his novel in a letter to W. Blackwood in 1899: „The idea behind *Heart of Darkness* [...] is ‚the criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa.‘“
- EDWARD GARNETT regards *Heart of Darkness* (=HoD) as „the high water mark‘ of Conrad’s ‚talent‘“. It is also an „analysis of the deterioration of the white man’s morale, when“ he came to Africa.
- E. M. FORSTER and JOHN MASEFIELD declared, that in his novell, Conrad is too „foggish“, „misty“ and „fuzzy“.

II. Reception until the 1950’s

- F. R. LEAVIS, *The Great Tradition*: He criticises Conrad in accordance with Forster for „his vaporous style“. But nevertheless he praises Conrad to create in his novell „an ‚overwhelming sinister and fantastic ‚atmosphere‘““.
- ALBERT J. GUERARD, *Conrad the Novellist*: He differs significantly from Leavis in focussing the attention not to Kurtz, but to Marlow who – according to Guerard – „is recounting a spiritual voyage of self-discovery“, that should be in the center of the readers interest.
- THOMAS MOSER, *Achievement and Decline*:
 - He developed the idea, „that Marlow in the jungle is like the reader in the text“. „By holding back informations and moving forward an backward in time, Conrad [...] involves the reader in a moral situation [and] makes the readers emotions follow [the] course [...] of the characters.
 - Moser sees *Heart of Darkness* as a anti-imperialistic work: „[D]arkness means truth, whiteness means falsehood“.

III. New Criticism/Formalism:

- LEO GURKO: Unity of opening and closing scene, unity with nature. Story as the microkosm of the global imperialism (an idealistic and benevolent one → rather tolerant view)
- AVROM FLEISHMAN, *Conrads Politics*:
 - He insists, that „the disruptive effects of imperialism on native societ[ies] were clear to Conrad.“
 - Whereas former critics focussed on the moral breakdown of the white, who went to Africa, F. emphasises the moral decay of the black people, since the white men arrived. They became barbarians when Kurtz came to them.

- BRUCE JOHNSON, *Conrad's models of mind*: Nature as a unity (like Gurko). Africans had this unity until the white destroyed it. Conrad regards „savage [as unity] with nature, while the [...] white men has fallen [...] from this primal unity“.

IV. Racist view

- CHINUA ACHEBE: In the opinion of the Nigerian novelist was „Conrad [...] a bloody racist.“ He accuses him to create an „image of Africa as [...] the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization.
- An opposite position to Achebe has been taken by WILSON HARRIS in 1990 who takes the view that Conrad's novel is a „forward looking ‚frontier-novel“.
- Other critics have sidestepped the question of Conrad's racism and focused on the question whether Conrad supported imperialism or not. So did e.g. HUNT HAWKINS, who regards the novel as critique against Belgique imperialism, but the author as a supporter of British imperialism..

V. Psychoanalytical approach

- FREDERICK CREWS, *Conrad's Uneasiness – and Ours*: tries to apply Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories to *Heart of Darkness*. *HoD* as the expression of the Oedipus complex.
 - Kurtz as image of the father
 - Marlow/Conrad as image of the rivalizing son

The other Critics, who wrote in tradition of crews didn't apply the Oedipus Complex

- BETTINA KNAPP writes, that *HoD* is „a tale [...] through which Conrad searched for his exiled shadow self“.
- BARRY STAMPFL emphasises the importance of the syntax in *HoD*. Using Freud's concept that repressed ideas sometimes are allowed to surface as long as they are negated, he shows, that Marlow is deep insight aware of the crime of white man in Africa.
- Eugene Goddheart regards „politics itself [...] as enactment of desire“. Synthesis of political and psychoanalytical view.

VI. Feministic view

- NINA PELICAN STRAUS: Women wouldn't be able to identify themselves with Marlow – the protagonist
- BETTY LONDON, *Reading race and gender in Conrad's dark continent*: Gender and race as interlocking systems → comparison between black peoples and women's fate. *HoD* promotes gender and racist ideology; in agreement with Chinua Achebe.

Literatur:

MURFIN, Ross C., „Introduction. The Critical Background“, in: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness. Complete Authoritative Text with Biographical and Historical Contexts, Critical History and Essays from Five Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. Ross. C. Murfin (Boston 1996), S. 94-114.